

Ambulance Fees: ?NO!

County voters overwhelmingly turn down proposed fee structure

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Montgomery County voters have spoken, according to County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett (D), and more than 54 percent of them said they do not want to adopt the controversial EMS Transit Fee, also known as the Ambulance Fee.

"The consequences of [the vote] are challenging," Leggett said, following the news of the vote. He announced in October that rejecting the ambulance fee could mean major budget cuts in the future and the laying off of more than 100 firefighters to make up for the loss of \$14 million in gross revenue the county factored in as revenue from the fee.

The legislation proposed that county residents' insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid be charged between \$300 and \$800 for an ambulance ride, depending on distance. Leggett said uninsured residents would not be required to pay the fee, but non-county residents are on the hook for any cost not covered by their insurance companies.

Some county council members, like Councilman Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3) called Leggett's announcement about the major budget cuts a "scare tactic" to get voters to support the fee. Andrews said he has developed an alternate list of cuts to make up for the loss.

"This vote is a strong statement from county voters that we don't need an ambulance fee to balance the county budget," said Andrews, who chairs the county's public safety committee. He said with the county income tax revenue figures coming in from the state later this month, many cuts could be avoided. Andrews also said residents should be reminded that the \$14 million represents the gross revenue the ambulance fee was projected to bring in; the net revenue was estimate at \$12.9 million. In the final days before the vote, supporters of the Ambulance Fee resorted to what some residents called "intimidating" tactics to gain their vote — fire trucks were parked outside of polling places and uniformed firefighters passed out information on the fee.

"This is just plain wrong," said Carolyn Darne of Gaithersburg, who said she was "accosted" by uniformed firefighters outside of an early voting center last week. "Isn't this illegal?"

County Fire Chief Richard Bowers confirmed last week that the uniformed firefighters pushing the Ambulance Fee at several locations were "on the clock," meaning the firefighters were pushing the fee on the county dime.

"They have the right to a freedom of speech, the same as everyone else," Bowers said.

“Now that the election is over I want a full accounting and the taxpayers need a full accounting of how much county money was spent on this campaign,” Andrews said. “It’s an abuse of county money, employees, and even email listservs—I mean every county email listserv ever created sent out something promoting the fee.”

Director of the county’s Volunteer Fire and Rescue Associate, Eric Bernard, filed a lawsuit against the county last week to stop county-paid employees from campaigning for the fee during their shifts, but the lawsuit was dismissed Monday.

“What the county is doing is legal — end of story,” County Attorney Marc Hansen said Monday following the dismissal.

The Ambulance Fee has been divisive since its creation seven years ago and narrowly passed this May in a county council 5-4 vote. Volunteer firefighters and rescue teams vocally opposed the vote and began a petition process to get the Ambulance Fee on the ballot. They collected nearly 53,000 resident signatures to do just that, but the victory seemed short-lived when the county’s Board of Elections rejected thousands of signatures for being illegible or not matching a registered voter’s name. The Maryland Court of Appeals turned over that decision and gave the voters a referendum on the ballot just a month shy of Tuesday’s election.

"The voters should thank the volunteer firefighters and rescue workers who preserved their right to vote on this issue," Andrews said.